

Does political comedy ever change anything?

David Carter

Political satire flourished in the ancient world, as the plays of Aristophanes show. But did laughter ever really change anything? David Carter investigates.

In April 2009 the long-running US comedy show *Saturday Night Live* won the prestigious Peabody Award for its coverage of the previous year's general election, in which Barack Obama was first elected president. The awarding panel said that 'The late-night legend stole the election-year thunder from its satirical competition ... and may have swayed the [presidential] race itself.' Much of the satire was aimed not at the republican nominee, John McCain, but at his vice-presidential running mate: Sarah Palin, the former governor of Alaska and widely seen as a political lightweight. Tina Fey, the show's former head writer, returned to *SNL* with a devastating portrayal of Palin's folksy manner and ignorance of foreign affairs.

But did Tina Fey really change voters' minds? The United States is a huge country, notorious for its cultural divisions. McCain's choice of Palin as his running mate was designed to appeal to the conservative wing of his own party, a very different group of people from the city-dwelling liberals that one assumes to be *SNL*'s core audience. Tina Fey may have confirmed some views but she was not so well placed to change them.

Poking fun at Cleon

Similar questions have been asked about the comic playwright Aristophanes, one of the leading popular entertainers of ancient Athens. Like many poets of his day, Aristophanes' comedy was characterized by *onomasti komodein* – making fun of people by name. In the mid-420s B.C. the butt of Aristophanes' jokes was a politician named Cleon, who made his name with an improbable victory over Sparta at the Battle of Pylos. Cleon spent the political capital gained from this success by cementing his position as the leading politician in Athens, urging his fellow citizens not to let up in their prosecution of the war, and strengthening his power base in the jury courts. These last two moves were especially unpopular with

Aristophanes.

Aristophanes appears to have made jokes about Cleon in his *Babylonians*, a comedy performed in the spring of 426 B.C. The following year, in the *Acharnians*, Aristophanes complained:

*I know well how I suffered at the hands
Of Cleon, on account of last year's show.
For, having dragged me in the Council House,
He slandered me, articulated lies,
And bathed me in a torrent of abuse,
So that I nearly perished in this filth.*

Cleon's charge against Aristophanes, we soon learn, was 'that I have spoken badly of the city in front of foreigners.' We cannot know the truth of this because the text of *Babylonians* has not survived; but it is fair to assume that Cleon had taken personal offence. The prosecution did not succeed.

Then, in the late winter of 424, Aristophanes presented the *Knights*, a merciless and sustained satirical attack on Cleon. The play is a political allegory. Imagine that the whole of the city was just one farm and that the many thousands of ordinary citizens were just one farmer. Imagine, further, that this farmer is routinely manipulated by his slaves, the very people who ought to serve him. This is how Athens and its citizens are represented in *Knights*. The farmer is named Demos (Greek for 'The People') and the slaves include Nicias and Demosthenes, two of the leading politicians/generals of the day. The dysfunctional political world represented here is one in which the people – who ought to be the masters in a democracy – are instead ruled by their supposed servants.

The worst of these slaves is the Paphlagonian, a thinly disguised representation of Cleon himself. Just like Tina Fey in her portrayal of Sarah Palin, Aristophanes achieves his comic effect

through the exaggeration of a few simple characteristics: in this case Cleon's vulgar manner and the stink of leather. (This was arguably unfair, but Cleon's father had apparently made his money from the smelly business of leather tanning.) In the course of the play Cleon is supplanted as the most favoured slave on the farm by an even commoner figure, the Sausage Seller; and finally Demos takes control and banishes Cleon from his farm.

In real life, far from being banished, Cleon became even more popular. Only a matter of weeks after the Athenian people (in their thousands) awarded *Knights* first prize for comedy at their drama festival, Cleon was elected for the first time to the board of ten generals. How could the citizens of Athens be so inconsistent? Two years later, in his production of *Clouds*, Aristophanes complained to his audience that

*The sun withdrew its wick into itself
And said it would not shine on you at all
If Cleon served as general. But you
Elected him regardless.*

Scholars to this day offer explanations for the Athenian people's inconsistency, some of them quite plausible: perhaps, like Tina Fey, Aristophanes was playing only to the portion of the Athenian citizenry who would not have voted for Cleon in the first place; and don't forget that Cleon could have come tenth in the vote and still been elected.

The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about

But we should not try too hard to find explanations. It is perfectly possible in a democracy to laugh at someone and vote for them. In fact we can take the success of *Knights* as proof of Cleon's importance and popularity: a satirist will always aim for the biggest target in order to get the biggest laughs. The very attributes that are easily caricatured are also the ones that make a politician well known, even well liked. The only thing a politician does not want to be mocked for is political weakness; anything else is acceptable and even

helpful.

So, when it comes to the political influence of satirists, I tend to agree with Peter Cook. He was one of the leading figures of the so-called 1960s satire boom. A brilliant comedian and the proprietor of *Private Eye*, he was also co-founder of a Soho nightclub called The Establishment, which provided a platform for political comedy. Interviewed at the time, Cook said, with heavy irony:

We see satire as primarily a tool for change. That's why we've modelled The Establishment on the political cabaret of Weimar Berlin, which did so much to prevent the rise of Adolf Hitler.

Political comedy never (or hardly ever) brings about political change.

In making this argument, however, I do not want to align myself with those who say that Aristophanic comedy was 'mere entertainment', or to say that it had no political function at all. On the contrary, political comedy had (and has) a very important role in political life. Consider the following two undeniable facts.

First, comedy must be funny. This sounds so obvious that perhaps I do not need to state it. But no comedian wants to 'die on stage'. A live comic performance gets a minute-by-minute audit of its success through the laughter of its audience. So Aristophanes' first priority was not to advance his political views (although he may have done that too) but to make the Athenians laugh.

Second, to poke fun at something is to criticize it. Therefore a useful by-product of political comedy is an immediate judgement of what is right or wrong in society. This judgement may turn out to be wrong (satirists are not required to be fair on their subjects, still less accurate) but it must have sufficient basis in popular opinion to strike a chord with the audience.

Food for thought: laughter and the political system at Athens

What Aristophanes succeeded in criticizing, as a by-product of his comedy, was a political system in which the people's judgement is only as good or bad as the advice they received from the politicians. In democratic Athens there was no elected political office (Cleon's generalship was a military position) and the people themselves were sovereign. The will of the people, as expressed by a majority vote in the assembly or the jury courts, was final. But in order to come to a vote they relied on the advice of expert speechmakers: the politicians who stood up in the assembly to propose this or that course of action. For these unelected (and technically powerless) men the only sign of their political popularity was their regular ability to attract a majority vote in favour of their

proposals in the assembly. In this harsh political climate it seems hardly surprising if a politician would occasionally tell the people what they wanted to hear instead of what they needed to hear.

It is this very tendency to flatter and pamper the people that Aristophanes seizes upon in the *Knights*. (Plato would make the same observation, in a more philosophical mode, some decades later.) The second half of the play is an extended allegory of an Athenian democratic assembly meeting, in which Cleon and the Sausage Seller fall over themselves in their efforts to flatter, cajole, and even bribe Demos so that they can win his (i.e. the people's) favour.

If this made Aristophanes' audience laugh, it also helped them to think politically; it provided them with the opportunity to reflect on their political system. Not all political reflection is of this type, of course, but then not all days are like the festival days on which the comedies were performed: a day off from the usual round of political meetings and court hearings. In watching *Knights* the Athenian citizen did not engage directly with electoral politics; rather, he took a step back from events and gained the kind of perspective that can only come with laughter.

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